ORGANIZATIONAL MAINTENANCE AND THE RETENTION DECISION IN GROUPS

LAWRENCE S. ROTHENBERG
California Institute of Technology

Understanding why members leave or remain in groups has received little attention despite its fundamental importance for organizational maintenance. In this analysis, a theory of experiential search is proposed and applied to Common Cause. Group participation is conceptualized as a process by which imperfectly informed decision makers learn about the organizations they join. This framework makes quitting understandable and provides a link between the initial membership choice and follow-up decisions.

Organizational maintenance is a fact of life all group leaders confront. For the majority of interest group entrepreneurs, who depend on constituent dues as a prime funding source, maintenance dictates the need to keep members contributing (but see Walker 1983).[1] Even seemingly small drops in numbers—10% or 20% net of replacements—are viewed with great alarm; and the loss of long-time contributors is perceived as a threat to the entity's survival. The key to creating a successful organization can be summarized simply: entice potential members to join, keep attrition below the rate at which replacements can be found, and establish a core membership.

If this prescription is correct, it is curious that analysts of interest group membership focus almost exclusively on first-time joiners.[2] Most authors do not deal explicitly with the dynamics underlying the *retention* choice, that is, the decision by existing members to remain in the group and keep on contributing.[3] Attracting members is fundamental for long-term organizational prosperity, but signing them up in the first place is only half the battle. The conditional joining decisions on whether to stay in the organization are also crucial.

Interest group entrepreneurs encounter a dilemma: how to retain members for whom leaving may be an attractive option.[4] The leaders focus on producing the selective incentives that the membership wants. They are also preoccupied with not antagonizing constituents, for fear they will cease contributing. They structure and operate the interest group so as to facilitate contributions (Moe 1980). How else, for example, can one explain the elaborate lengths to which many leaders will go to ensure the appearance of rank-and-file participation in the organizational decision-making process?

In the political arena, the retention problem should hit home hardest for public interest groups. Their leaders lack the occupational or industry bases that underlie so many private associations. They cannot draw on a "natural" membership, among whom either selective incentives are easily generated or coercion induces contributions. That people sign

AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW
VOL. 82 NO. 4 DECEMBER 1988

up for public interest groups in the first place in light of the collective action dilemma—not to speak of retaining their organizational allegiance—is a phenomenon that has generated considerable scholarly interest (Berry 1977; Smith 1985).

Why, then, do members of an organization, especially a public interest group, choose to remain? Is this process indistinguishable from the original decision to join—whatever that may be? How are the two connnected, if at all?

These issues will be explored by analyzing what is popularly considered the quintessential public interest group: Common Cause. In the fall of 1981, over 12 hundred Common Cause members were surveyed using a mail questionnaire. All respondents were queried about a wide variety of issues—membership and its benefits, personal attitudes, previous history in Common Cause, and future intentions, to name a few. A stratified design oversampled Common Cause–designated activists, who were defined as steering committee coordinators in congressional districts or coordinators or activators of telephone networks. They comprise 23% of the sample, a roughly sixfold overrepresentation. Since this stratification is based on characteristics that are exogenous to the retention decision, this sampling strategy has no impact on the hypothesis tests conducted in this analysis (Amemiya 1985; Hausman and Wise 1979). These data furnish a rare opportunity to explore the retention decision and to learn why people participate in political organizations despite all the obstacles to collective action.[5]

The first part of this analysis lays out the theoretical groundwork by specifying alternative conceptualizations of the membership renewal process.[6] Despite frequent assertions in the literature that the study of organizational membership is theory-rich and data-poor (e.g., Arnold 1982; Shaiko 1986), it is argued here that the available models require further development. Once the proper theoretical underpinnings have been laid, the focus shifts to the empirical world. Unlike prior descriptive work on the original membership decision by authors who fail to test hypotheses, competing retention models are made operational and tested to determine whether it is possible to make sense of members' decisions to stay in or leave organizations.

Theoretical Perspectives: Joining, Remaining, and Experiential Search

Although this study looks primarily at renewal decisions, the initial reason for joining is the logical place to start. In the first place, virtually all of the available theoretical research focuses on the original membership calculus. Second, an analysis of the initial choice furnishes a vantage point from which to consider the renewal decision, and vice versa. The challenge is to integrate perspectives on both initial contributions and retention decisions.

Parenthetically, the viewpoint taken in this analysis and the tradition of research in which it is written is decision-theoretic rather than game-theoretic, despite the latter's importance for studying collective action (e.g., Axelrod 1984; Hardin 1982). While game theory furnishes many insights into how actors behave strategically in small-number situations, it is inappropriate for explaining why individuals contribute—and keep contributing—to large groups. Decision-theoretic models in which individuals are playing against nature are more suitable for understanding the retention choice.

Most theorists working in this research tradition (e.g., Clark and Wilson 1961; Moe 1980; Wilson 1973) typically identify a number of benefit types: selective, solidary, and purposive. *Selective*

benefits are tangible returns that have monetary values and are derived from contributions. They either may be divisible, private rewards or may emanate from members' impacts on the level of collective goods provided to everyone. *Solidary* benefits stem from associational interactions, while *purposive* benefits are intangible rewards garnered from contributing to the group because of its stated goals.[7] These theorists then examine which of these benefit types are important and why.

In the mid-1960s, Mancur Olson (1965) revolutionized perceptions about why citizens join organized groups. His seminal contribution details the difficulties associated with collective action. Individuals join large groups, he argues, because the value of the available selective benefits exceeds the costs of membership.

Olson assumes that individuals have full information, are only interested in economic rewards, and maximize without error. In large groups, this implies that only dues levels and divisible selective benefits will be relevant. Political activity is simply a by-product of narrowly self-interested behavior. Given this framework, it is obvious that the conditional membership decision should follow the same cost-benefit analysis. Since in general not much will change from one contribution period to the next, particularly given the assumption of perfect information, little explicable organizational attrition is possible.

Those challenging Olson's theory have taken two principal tacts. Some (e.g., Clark and Wilson 1961; Moe 1980; Wilson 1973) emphasize that purposive and solidary incentives are important, along with selective returns, in the decision calculus.

Individuals who possess perfect information but are not satisfied by selective incentives alone may join because the potential purposive and solidary payoffs push them over the threshold where benefits exceed costs. People derive consumption benefits from interpersonal interactions and the purposive statements their contributions make. The multiplicity of incentives can be easily incorporated into the Olsonian framework, and the same inferences about the conditional membership decision still hold. This argument is intuitively reasonable; Olson himself recognizes the potential importance of nonmonetary returns but ignores them for reasons of parsimony.

Another critique is that the key problem lies less with the breadth of incentives than with the assumption of perfect information. Moe (1980) maintains that potential group members do not possess perfect information. Consequently, some decision makers miscalculate their own contributions to the provision of collective goods and hence the level of selective incentives the group offers. A subset of the population mistakenly thinks of itself as highly influential and incorporates its allegedly substantial contributions to the provision of collective goods into its membership calculi. Individuals whose perceptions of their efficacy put them at the upper end of the population distribution join in disproportionate numbers. The assumption seems to be that once these contributors miscalculate, they keep repeating the same mistake over and over. Again, organizational membership ought to be stable, and there should be little explicable attrition.

The relaxation of the perfect information assumption is eminently reasonable and extremely important. But precisely how imperfect information affects contributions needs to be rethought. It ought to influence more than simply individuals' initial estimates of the benefits they derive from contributing to collective goods.[8] The conclusion that many members join organizations only because they make mistakes is unsettling—especially because educated individuals tend to join in

greater proportions. Implying that those committing errors keep contributing for years without revising their prior beliefs is even more difficult to believe. As in the two models elaborated above, the conditional membership decision replicates the initial choice to join. While there may be some exogenous forces prompting a few individuals to leave, the outcomes generally ought to be the same under all three models.

A more reasonable supposition is that the decision to join makes sense as a strategy by individuals who recognize their lack of knowledge. Members join groups to learn about them, and as they acquire knowledge, some can be expected to leave. The politics of *experiential search* offer a superior perspective for understanding retention and integrating it with the initial membership choice.

A Theory of Experiential Search

Organizational membership can be conceptualized as a search process. Citizens lack complete information about all of the alternative groups they might join and the associated costs and benefits. They presumably would like to discover an organization or organizations that will give them enough returns relative to costs—regardless of the types of benefits they seek—that they will be content to remain.

Experiential search can be distinguished from the economics literature on sequential search (for an excellent recent overview, see Mortensen 1986). In the latter, individuals typically search sequentially until they meet their reservation wage or price, where the expected marginal cost of an additional iteration equals the expected marginal return. In these models, workers or consumers gather information before taking a job or purchasing a product.

There are some models (e.g., Burdett 1978; Wilde 1979) that permit on-the-job or experiential learning by workers within a sequential search framework. These perspectives are much closer in spirit to the experiential search theory propounded here, but there are still important differences. For example, by and large, workers must search for a job, while there is no similar compulsion to join a public interest group.

In looking for an organization to fill their needs, individual decision makers with fixed preferences have three options: they can (1) conclude that given the problems of obtaining information and the costs of membership, it is advisable to give up; (2) search over alternative associations without contributing; or (3) join an organization to learn whether membership is worthwhile. This final option, learning through exposure, can have a number of facets—developing an understanding about how a group functions, whether it is effective in achieving its goals, and whether its outputs are in line with one's preferences, to name a few. Given the low monetary cost of joining numerous voluntary associations, particularly public interest groups, many should opt for experiential learning because it is an efficient information-gathering technique.[9]

A factor predisposing searchers to join an organization is that many attributes of membership are only observable by participation. These are specific characteristics, while those that can be observed without joining are general characteristics. These two types can be thought of as opposite poles on a continuum that reflects the difficulty of acquiring information without making a commitment; most informational traits combine elements of both.

Almost every factor incorporated into the joining (or retention) calculus can be described, at least partially, as a specific characteristic. The only purely general feature of organizational membership is the dues level. If the remaining factors

were ranked from more to less general, they might roughly be ranked as follows: costs other than dues levels, purposive benefits, divisible benefits, solidary benefits, and collective benefits.

When the costs of evaluating specific qualities are relatively low, prospective contributors will tend, ceteris paribus, to join, accumulate knowledge, and then decide either to quit or to stay and learn more. Since a reasonable inference is that one accumulates knowledge more and more slowly over time, the expected rate of dropping out should diminish temporally. Specific characteristics should also be more important for newcomers than for veterans.

In the organizational context, first-time joiners will have imperfect information about costs other than dues. How can the costs of phone calls asking for assistance—writing legislators, contacting other members, and so on—or appeals for monetary contributions in excess of dues be established without error in advance? As contributors spend time in the group, they will develop a growing awareness of the true price of membership and behave accordingly.

Along these same lines, the value of purposive benefits will be increasingly evident with experience. Although members will probably have some initial idea about what the group stands for, they will gradually learn whether it represents those things that provide them with consumption benefits.

Before they join, potential members will also lack complete information about the quality of the divisible benefits furnished to participants. Accurately assessing the full value of a groups' offerings without consuming them regularly is all but impossible; membership offers an opportunity to learn about their utility firsthand.

This inference has an important implication: Suppose that before engaging in experiential search, small contributors deduce that their donations will have no impact on the level of collective goods provided. Presume too that purposive and solidary incentives play no role in eliciting contributions. Even in this extreme case where lack of knowledge is irrelevant for an individual's valuation of collective, purposive, or solidary benefits, imperfect information *still* ought to be a major factor in members' decision calculi.

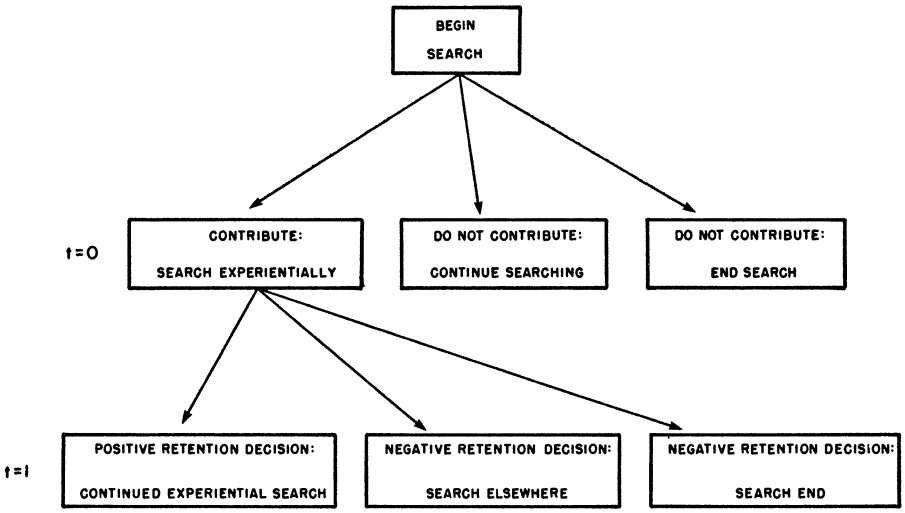
If contributors are motivated by solidary returns, it is unlikely that they will have a full idea of the value of these benefits either. Only immersion in day-to-day organizational operations will permit them to see whether the interpersonal interactions are sufficiently rewarding.

Experiential search should be especially germane for learning about collective goods. Member education should have several elements. Contributors ought to become more cognizant of what collective benefits their organization actually proffers. Furthermore, those who believe that their contributions to the provision of collective goods are nontrivial should learn about the value of these goods and the insignificance of their contributions. Members who donate resources to have an impact on the magnitude of public goods provided—and not because they gain purposive rewards from contributing to collective goods—should leave the group over time, ceteris paribus.

To reiterate, citizens with perfect information (or those who have imperfect information but never learn) will join those organizations that have the highest net benefits for them. While changes in exogenous conditions might lead some to exit, the strong presumption is, Once a participant, always a participant.[10] But when the assumption of imperfect information is embedded within the experiential search framework, quitting becomes comprehensible.

Group membership might usefully be conceptualized as a decision-theoretic process in which members join an organi-

Figure 1. Organizational Membership as Experiential Search



zation and then reevaluate their decision in accordance with what they have learned about the costs and benefits of participating (see Figure 1). Each membership renewal period is another stage in this decision process. And each time, the contributor has better information. Learning about specific characteristics continues indefinitely, but the amount of additional information accumulated through experiential search diminishes over time. Members weed themselves out, especially during their first few years in an organization. Information updating can reinforce a propensity to remain in the group for another contribution period or lead to the conclusion that membership is less valuable than foregone opportunities. Those abdicating membership either become politically inactive or continue searching for an alternative that makes participation worthwhile. For those who stay in the organization, over-time learning should become a less and less salient factor in the decision whether to stay or go.

Experiential Search Theory: An Empirical Test

The experiential search theory implies that withdrawal is a rational response by imperfectly informed decision makers. Unlike the previous three models, under this formulation members' cost-benefit calculations should change substantially over time. This expectation has three implications that can be tested with cross-sectional data on Common Cause membership:[11] (1) a model of the conditional membership decision should uncover fairly strong relationships between costs and benefits, even for those individuals who have previously elected to join; (2) the longer contributors have been in the organization, the less likely they ought to be to leave, because the likely increment in knowledge declines over time; and (3) the impact of those factors that guide the retention calculus, particularly highly specific characteristics, ought to be stronger for relative newcomers.

The true test of this framework is how

well these theoretical assertions explain behavior in the empirical world. Too often students of organizational membership have been content to utilize a few descriptive tables—largely because they were analyzing the initial membership decision with data only about members. This research focuses on testable hypotheses about membership dynamics.

The empirical analysis of Common Cause renewal decisions unfolds in four steps. First, to provide the proper context, I outline the costs and benefits of contributing to the association. Second, I provide descriptive data about the reasons members say they initially joined, to establish a baseline for comparison with their subsequent decisions. Third, I examine whether those who belong to an organization learn over time, to provide side evidence about the assertions made earlier. Finally, I make models of the conditional membership process operational and directly test them to determine which is most empirically valid.

The Costs and Benefits of Common Cause Membership

Common Cause is the most prominent of the new wave of organizations associated with the burgeoning consumer movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (for a detailed case study of Common Cause, see McFarland 1984). This feature alone makes it a natural candidate for study. But it is the leadership's strong dependence on its more than 200 thousand members that makes it especially appealing for analysis. The members are essential because of both their financial contributions and their activism at key points during the organization's external political battles. What, then, are the costs and benefits that motivate citizens to contribute to Common Cause?

Initially joining the association is a reasonably low-cost activity. Organizational dues are predictably moderate: $20 per year. Members are fairly well-off—their median family income in 1981 fell in the $25 to $35 thousand range, about 50% higher than the national average.[12] A tenable assumption is that relatively well-heeled contributors can learn about Common Cause or other moderately priced organizations through experiential search.

These members should discover new information about the value of belonging. They learn that there are additional costs to participation. Members are solicited to give more financial support, and many comply. In fact, 63% of those surveyed reported contributing more than the required $20. Despite this generosity, Common Cause, with a staff of less than one hundred, lacks the financial resources to compete on an even footing with private interest groups. Like public interest associations generally, it employs other instruments to make up for these shortfalls. One critical resource is energizing contributors to become politically involved. Members are asked to give of their time and become part of Common Cause's activist core. They are encouraged to immerse themselves in the association's sophisticated, congressionally based, grassroots network, as well as in state and local organizations.

It is difficult to be simply a passive contributor. Those preferring only to write checks will find themselves the targets of periodic mobilization efforts when battles over issues pinpointed by the leadership come to a head. Forty-three percent of all members in the survey (32% of the rank and file and 68% of the activists) said they had been contacted by Common Cause in the past year and asked to write to Congress about some issue.[13]

Contributors also have opportunities to learn about the complete gamut of organizational benefits. Although the stereotypical individual who joins Common Cause is characterized as a liberal do-gooder, the leadership obviously believes that divisible benefits are necessary to

keep members happy. A bimonthly magazine is distributed to association members as an enticement to contribute; perhaps the consumption of this and the other political information furnished is sufficient to elicit a minimal annual contribution.[14]

Some may perceive another private return from participation, namely, career advancement. Suggesting self-promotion as a motivation is antithetical to the high moral ground that Common Cause tries to occupy, but it is consistent with Olson's by-product theory. An unexpectedly high proportion of respondents—23%—replied that they had political aspirations. Thirty-five percent of those surveyed stated that they either had political aspirations or had at some time sought a party position, an elected office, or an appointed office. When broken down between rank and file and activists, the percentages are 32 and 45, respectively. This discovery suggests that the participation of many allegedly altruistic liberals may be motivated by the search for a springboard onto the political opportunity structure (Schlesinger 1966) or perhaps by a desire to be educated about liberal positions. If it does the trick, membership is renewed; if not, the aspirant moves on and continues to search.

Common Cause has been involved in many celebrated battles, generally associated with "good government" issues designed to provide a host of nonexclusive collective goods. The leadership selects its policy areas carefully to maintain membership loyalty. To gather information about constituent preferences, the staff annually polls contributors for their opinions about the Common Cause political agenda. Choosing those issues over which opinions are particularly homogeneous is considered especially important (McFarland 1984).

This decision-making strategy has several interesting implications. It implies a belief that members either think they have an impact on the provision of collective goods or get considerable value from the purposive statement that their participation in Common Cause makes to the world. Assuming that the leadership's inference is correct, this conflict-minimizing strategy should also mitigate the impact on retention decisions of members' satisfaction or dissatisfaction over the association's political actions. If those in charge selected issues exclusively on other criteria, for instance, if they mistakenly viewed political action as a by-product that has no weight in participants' decision calculi, then contributors' evaluations of Common Cause's political efforts would be more germane in conditional membership decisions.

Common Cause's decentralized structure obviously provides ample opportunities for interpersonal interactions (see also McFarland 1984). Although much of this is a product of organizational weakness—lack of funds forces the staff to rely heavily upon its other major resource, an energetic membership—it may also be a strength when it comes to keeping contributors in the organization.

Why Join in the First Place?

Information on members' professed reasons for joining Common Cause cannot explain why people belong. There are no data on those electing not to sign up. However, contributors' beliefs about why they originally joined do furnish a vantage point from which the retention process can be understood. Are participants' reasons for staying or leaving consistent with their assessments of why they initially contributed? Or do other unrelated factors enter their calculations?

Using an open-ended format, members were asked why they joined. Their responses were coded according to the type of benefits they seemed to value most. The most intriguing result is that

the vast majority of contributors believe that they got involved for purposive reasons (Table 1). Even employing an extraordinarily broad definition of selective benefits, 72% of respondents must be classified as professing that purposive concerns stimulated them to sign up.[15] These data are consistent with the experiential search argument that members know little about the specific costs and benefits of belonging when they initially join. General reformist tendencies were

Table 1. Members' Proclaimed Reasons for Joining Common Cause

Reason for Joining	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Purposive benefits		
Supports general goals, issues, or efforts	169	14.7
Keeps government honest and fair	162	14.1
Reforms, improves government; makes government more responsive	132	11.5
Combats special interests, lobbyists, PACs, corporations, big business	79	6.9
Supports public interest and the common good	71	6.2
Is a watchdog-investigatory group	53	4.6
Is a nonpartisan group	26	2.3
Protests political power and corruption	21	1.8
Supports in general (no issue content)	20	1.7
Is concerned about democracy	18	1.6
Is antigovernment or anti-political parties	17	1.5
Appeals to sense of civic duty	13	1.1
Addresses problems in society, government policies	11	1.0
Maintains checks and balances	10	0.9
Is unique and important	9	0.8
Needs financial support	8	0.7
Is a liberal and anticonservative group	6	0.5
Subtotal	825	71.9
Selective benefits (collective or divisible)		
Makes member effective	65	5.7
Provides political information	53	4.6
Addresses specific issue(s)	35	3.0
Offers a chance for personal political activity	32	2.8
Provides collective action necessary for change	28	2.4
Supplies leadership	26	2.3
Provides representation	18	1.6
Informs citizens and encourages participatory democracy	12	1.0
Offers a chance to be mobilized on issues	11	1.0
Is effective	9	0.8
Is an activist organization	5	0.4
Subtotal	294	25.6
Solidary benefits		
Family or friends belong	11	1.0
Joining is part of life style—social reasons	3	0.3
Subtotal	14	1.3
Miscellaneous	16	1.4
Total	1,149	100.2

Table 2. Organizational Experience and Knowledge about Group (%)

Years in Group	Percentage Correct					Mean Percentage Correct
	0	25	50	75	100	
1	34.1	31.7	26.8	4.9	2.4	27.5
2	34.9	23.3	30.2	8.1	3.5	30.5
3	20.4	18.4	28.6	25.5	7.1	45.2
4	9.6	19.3	22.9	42.2	6.0	53.9
5	7.3	15.9	35.4	30.5	11.0	55.5
6	12.1	13.6	28.8	30.3	15.2	55.7
7	5.4	14.7	28.7	31.0	20.2	61.4
8	2.5	13.6	25.9	42.0	16.0	63.9
9	4.9	10.7	29.1	32.0	23.3	64.6
10	3.4	11.2	16.9	47.2	21.3	70.0
11	2.8	8.4	25.2	28.0	35.5	71.3
12	5.3	5.3	23.7	39.5	26.3	69.1
Number of Cases	116	159	307	368	205	1,115

Note: $X^2 = 254$, $df = 44$. Each cell gives the percentage of members who have been in group for x years (row) who get the designated percentage (column) of the answers correct.

especially evident among those with a purposive impetus. Even many whose initial participation allegedly reflects the quest for selective benefits exhibit a broad participatory impulse. They claim they chose Common Cause to be politically effective or mobilized and generally not because of specific issues or other detailed benefits.

Do Members Learn?

An assumption underpinning the experiential search framework is that members learn about the costs and benefits of participating. More extensive knowledge about these organizational features can lead to higher or lower levels of retention. But regardless of whether members stay or leave, learning is a fundamental component of experiential search.[16] A prerequisite for validating this perspective is ascertaining whether contributors learn through organizational exposure.[17] In Common Cause, individuals with many years of associational experience are no different sociodemographically than newcomers. They are indistinguishable in terms of education or income, so any variation must emanate from other sources. Findings that long-term contributors know more about the organization would demonstrate that members learn and would provide important side evidence that experiential search is fundamental for associational membership.

Several straightforward tests clearly show that new arrivals and long-time contributors are only distinguishable as a result of their organizational exposure. Members answered a battery of four basic questions about their organizational acumen.[18] When respondents' knowledge is broken out by length of membership, the experiential search perspective receives strong support. Long-time contributors know a great deal more than newcomers (Table 2). Roughly one-third of the one- or two-year members missed all four of these questions; the same is true of less than 5% of the members who have been in the group for more than 10 years.

Also, as expected, the mean level of knowledge from one cohort to the next shows a clear pattern of diminishing

Table 3. Organizational Experience and Group Issue Opinions (Common Cause Members without Opinions) (%)

Issue	Organizational Experience (Years in Group) 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total Percentage	Number of Cases	X^2
Limit government spending	58	38	37	31	40	37	33	39	51	45	51	43	41	1,155	22*
Sunset legislation	40	23	20	21	11	13	9	11	6	8	14	10	14	1,164	54**
Campaign finance	24	24	11	10	6	7	5	1	2	1	7	3	7	1,167	74**
Equal rights amendment	28	30	26	19	24	19	13	18	17	12	15	13	18	1,162	25**
Lobby disclosure	20	20	14	8	5	9	5	1	3	1	11	4	7	1,174	56**

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

Table 4. Organizational Experience and Personal Issue Opinions (Common Cause Members without Opinions) (%)

Issue	Organizational Experience (Years in Group) 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total Percentage	Number of Cases	X^2
Limit government spending	5	8	7	7	6	9	3	2	8	5	3	6	6	1,173	9
Sunset legislation	2	3	9	2	1	6	2	1	1	3	1	3	3	1,183	21*
Campaign finance	2	1	6	6	2	4	2	1	0	1	2	4	3	1,181	15
Equal rights amendment	0	3	6	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2	1,182	13
Lobby disclosure	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1,186	11
Defense spending	10	10	4	11	12	9	6	3	5	5	5	10	7	1,180	15
Equality of opportunity	3	16	19	12	17	6	18	10	17	17	19	12	15	1,179	18
Social service spending	5	11	6	10	1	14	6	6	10	8	8	8	8	1,167	13
Inflation	13	22	16	22	20	18	11	16	21	21	24	19	19	1,167	11
Abortion	10	1	7	5	2	4	2	4	2	1	3	3	3	1,178	16
Minimum guaranteed income	13	8	16	14	17	14	12	18	16	16	20	17	15	1,172	7
School busing	8	15	10	14	11	6	15	15	16	17	20	13	14	1,176	12
Nuclear energy	8	10	10	14	20	11	15	11	13	11	8	17	13	1,180	13
Soviet relations	33	39	25	20	32	34	32	27	29	31	29	30	30	1,180	10

*$p < .05$

marginal returns with organizational experience. A year has roughly four times as much impact for newcomers as for long-time members.

Next, consider knowledge about the collective goods that Common Cause furnishes. Members were asked about associational positions on five issues on the group's political agenda. In four out of five instances, new members are substantially more likely to reply that they do not know the Common Cause position on these policies (Table 3).[19] But when queried about their own positions on either these issues or other items not on the Common Cause agenda, differences between older and newer members are nonexistent, with one slight exception (Table 4).

While recent members are as opinionated about the public agenda as long-time contributors, they are less well versed in the organization's stances. A substantial portion of new members could not have been motivated to join the group by its overall issue positions, since they did not

know them. This finding supports the belief that general, largely purposive benefits, rather than returns from specific collective goods, are at the heart of the initial joining decision.

The learning process is also apparently fundamental for the leap from rank and file to activist status. Stated bluntly, activists are made, not born. Modal activists have been in the organization for three years when they move up from the rank and file; a scant 10% of all members are activists from the start.[20] This behavior is consistent with a search framework. Imperfectly informed individuals join the organization, learn about it, and decide what their next step is—whether to drop out, remain in the rank and file, or step up to the activist cadre.

The learning process provides initial side evidence that experiential search is a fundamental component of organizational membership. Contributors write checks and then refine their knowledge about the organization.

Exploring the Conditional Membership Process

Quitting is an important consequence of experiential search. This perspective requires that some members leave, but the likelihood of exit should diminish with experience.

Retention decisions should be explicable using the experiential search framework. To test this, four nested models, similar to those previously discussed, are made operational: (1) the Olsonian model in which divisible benefits are assumed to exceed costs; (2) the same model with organizational experience incorporated; (3) this second specification with collective benefits added; and (4) a complete formulation that also takes into account purposive and solidary returns. Estimation of these models permits the determination of both whether organizational search is involved and what specific factors drive Common Cause participants to retain or revoke their membership.

Measurement. The likelihood of membership retention in the next contribution period—the dependent variable—is made operational using a seven-point scale. Scores range from one for those certain to quit to seven for those certain to remain. Roughly consistent with Common Cause's 78% renewal rate, 54% of all members queried responded that they were certain to renew (it should be remembered that the sample is weighted toward activists; only 49% of the rank and file expressed certainty that they would stay). The other 46% expressed different levels of uncertainty (scored from six to one): 26% called renewal very likely; 12% said it was likely; 3% suggested that they were not sure; and another 6% claimed that they were not very likely to, were unlikely to, or definitely would not renew their membership. Half of the organization was up for grabs to one degree or another, and a nontrivial minority was relatively certain of leaving Common Cause.

The factors posited to structure this choice are made operational in the following manner:

1. *Costs of membership* are measured as the ability to pay (family income) and the respondent's sensitivity to costs.[21]
2. The relevance of three *divisible benefits* are incorporated: (a) the importance of publications and whether contributions would cease without them; (b) the perceived value of political information; and (c) whether or not a member has political aspirations.[22]
3. The lure of *collective benefits* is gauged by whether individuals (a) agree with the positions of Common Cause on key issues; (b) consider the leadership effective in providing collective goods; (c) are active in the group; and (d) believe that

they are efficacious in the production of collective goods.[23]

4. *Learning* is measured by organizational experience, made operational to capture the hypothesis of diminishing marginal returns with both a logarithmic and a linear term of the number of years in the organization. Incorporating linear and logarithmic terms is a standard means of measuring diminishing marginal returns (e.g., Maddala 1977).

5. *Purposive benefits* are tapped by whether respondents feel an obligation as good citizens to participate and whether they care about the group.[24]

6. *Solidary benefits* are measured by whether the members value the interpersonal interactions Common Cause provides and a dummy variable on whether they have friends and colleagues within the organization.[25]

Given these indicators, many expectations are straightforward. Others are not as clear as they might seem and will be contingent on how well Common Cause provides benefits—for instance, the degree to which the organization satisfies members who want to promote their political careers or who seek rewarding interpersonal relationships.

One clear, important expectation is that the sign for the logarithmic version of organizational experience ought to be positive (but there is no expectation for the linear term); this would reflect the diminishing marginal impact of experiential learning. Organizational experience acts as a surrogate for the respondents' level of information and their certainty about a host of factors that are correlated with time. As the previous empirical analyses demonstrate, members gradually learn about how a group functions and slowly develop an understanding of its positions. They should also become more certain about their subjective valuation of the host of benefits that the association offers. A big advantage in employing years in the organization is that it is a continuous measure, which makes it feasible to test the hypothesis of diminishing marginal returns.[26]

It is possible to debate whether some of the other indicators measure one factor or another. Some ambiguities are inevitable, since benefit types are not empirically orthogonal to one another; and particularly in the case of collective and purposive rewards (to be discussed shortly), imperfectly informed individuals are likely to confound one benefit with another. On the whole, however, the indicators in this analysis gauge what has traditionally been meant by divisible, collective, purposive, and solidary benefits, as well as the costs of membership.

Results and interpretations. The ordinary least squares estimates for these models (Table 5) show that the retention decision is explicable.[27] Even when the focus of analysis is current members—a homogeneous, truncated sample of society—it is possible to separate out those prone to stay from those likely to leave. Such results are inconsistent with the informational assumptions underlying previous formulations of the joining process.

A framework incorporating various kinds of returns and learning does a superior job to more limited alternatives. A series of F tests comparing each model with its more restricted predecessor—model 2 with model 1 ($F_{2,1076} = 33.15$; $p < .01$); model 3 with model 2 ($F_{4,971} = 42.11$; $p < .01$); and model 4 with model 3 ($F_{4,911} = 7.93$; $p < .05$)—clearly identify model 4 as the best specification (see Pindyck and Rubinfeld 1981, 117–19, for an explication of joint F tests). Looking at selective incentives generated via divisible benefits is not enough; collective, solidary, and purposive benefits, as well as organizational learning, also affect the decision calculus.[28]

The whole gamut of costs and benefits go into the retention decision.[29] The price

Table 5. Determinants of Retention Decisions

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	6.25**	5.38**	2.55**	.61**
Costs				
Ability to pay	.01	-.01	.03	.03
Low sensitivity to costs	1.11**	1.04**	.83**	.78**
Moderate sensitivity to costs	.51**	.52**	.45**	.42**
Divisible benefits				
Value of political information	.01*	.01	.01	.03
Publications' value	.15**	.15**	.09**	.08**
Low sensitivity to provision of publications	.29**	.20**	.12	.08
Moderate sensitivity to provision of publications	.24**	.21**	.12	.06
Political aspirations	-.15**	-.19**	-.18**	-.11
Learning				
Organizational experience		-.03	-.02	-.02
Natural log of organizational experience		.60**	.38**	.39**
Collective benefits				
Agreement with group's positions			.01**	.01**
Assessment of leadership's achievements			.30**	.27**
Activism in group			.08**	.10**
Feeling of personal efficacy regarding group			.05**	.05**
Purposive benefits				
Care about group				.04**
Sense of citizen duty				.07**
Solidary benefits				
Value interaction				.12**
Friends or colleagues are members				.10**
Number of cases	1,114	1,085	986	930
Adjusted R^2	.18	.22	.34	.36

*$p < .10$
**$p < .05$

of membership is an important consideration, although ability to pay, per se, is not. While all members know the monetary cost of joining, some are especially sensitive to it. Those finding that membership is not worth the opportunity costs—of foregoing participation in another organization, for instance—depart and either search elsewhere or become inactive.

The salience of divisible benefits is more nebulous. When the Olsonian model is made operational the group's publications, the political information it provides, and the opportunities it furnishes to political aspirants all appear important. When other benefits are fully integrated into the decision framework, however, everything but the value of Common Cause publications is insignificant, and even the estimate of its impact is halved.

The utility of the Olsonian framework as a predictive model for retention decisions in public interest groups is questionable. As an explanatory framework, it is even less successful. This is not a direct indictment of a perspective designed to explain initial joining in economic groups. However, it does pro-

vide some reason to doubt the assumptions underlying this decision-making model.

The effect of political aspirations, although insignificant in the final model ($t = 1.3$), is nevertheless intriguing. These individuals are less likely to remain in Common Cause than other contributors. Once they learn about the true nature of the organization—its antagonistic stance toward political parties, for example—they may decide that Common Cause is the wrong place for them and move on. Even if the politically ambitious are more likely than others to join the association (and given the percentage of members who have such motivations, this is probably the case), they can still be more prone to quit. Conversely, the relationship between future aspirations and retention will be positive in organizations that are good mechanisms for building political careers.

Collective benefits appear to be an important element in the conditional joining calculus. These findings refute the assertion that members never learn about collective goods; if the latter were the case, these estimates would be insignificant. Despite the fact that few members cited such returns as the principal reason for initially joining, they seem to be the most relevant factor for the retention choice.[30] Assessment of the leadership, level of activism, and feelings of efficacy all have an impact. So too does agreement with Common Cause's positions. Of particular salience are those good government issues—sunset legislation, campaign finance, and regulation of lobbyists—in which the organization has traditionally been involved.[31]

An explanation for this tension between the apparent insignificance of collective benefits in joining decisions and their critical role for retention calculi centers on experiential search. Many people are ignorant about the organization when they first sign on but gradually learn upon joining. All they might know initially is that Common Cause is a group that deals with good government issues and for which experiential search comes cheaply. After contributing, they discover more specifically what the organization does and how much it accomplishes. These data are employed in calculating whether or not to stay in the group. Members move away from a concern about seemingly purposive benefits toward an interest in more specific collective returns.

This result implies that the traditional dichotomy between purposive and collective benefits—the former representing an adherence to the group's stated goals and the latter reflecting members' beliefs about their impacts on the production of collective goods—reflects a false distinction. The difference between these two types of rewards is overwhelmed, at least as it is tapped by survey instruments in the public interest group context, by the conditioning effect of information on the estimated policy benefits derived from membership.

Put another way, what is being interpreted as collective benefits may really be specific statements about purposive returns (this has previously been implied in Hardin 1982). Contributors' responses may reflect their perceptions of the group's, and not their personal, impact on the provision of collective benefits. Their assessment of the group's leadership and policies is important for deciding whether to exit because they think the organization can have an impact on the production of public goods. They learn about the group's efficacy and how their policy preferences correspond to the organization's and either stay or depart accordingly. Learning integrates initial and conditional membership: broad motivations are replaced by more specific ones. Group leaders have an incentive to foster the confusion between individual and associational efficacy. To the extent that they control the information contributors

employ to update their cost-benefit calculi, the elites will add to the confusion by telling members that they make a difference by acting collectively.

Explicitly purposive benefits are still germane. Common Cause is a good place for people who really care about such returns and want to be good citizens. Even broad policy attachments to the group may make participation satisfying. Consequently, contributors who have an abiding interest in being good citizens or who develop a strong identification with Common Cause tend to keep on giving.

To summarize, these findings about collective and purposive rewards support the proposition that members go from general to specific reasons for staying or leaving as they become more knowledgeable. This explanation is consistent with the side evidence about learning. All that is additionally required is the assumption that individuals recognize their informational shortfalls before joining and employ experiential search to remedy them partially. This strategy leads members to offer vaguely purposive reasons for initially joining and more specific concerns about collective goods for staying or leaving.

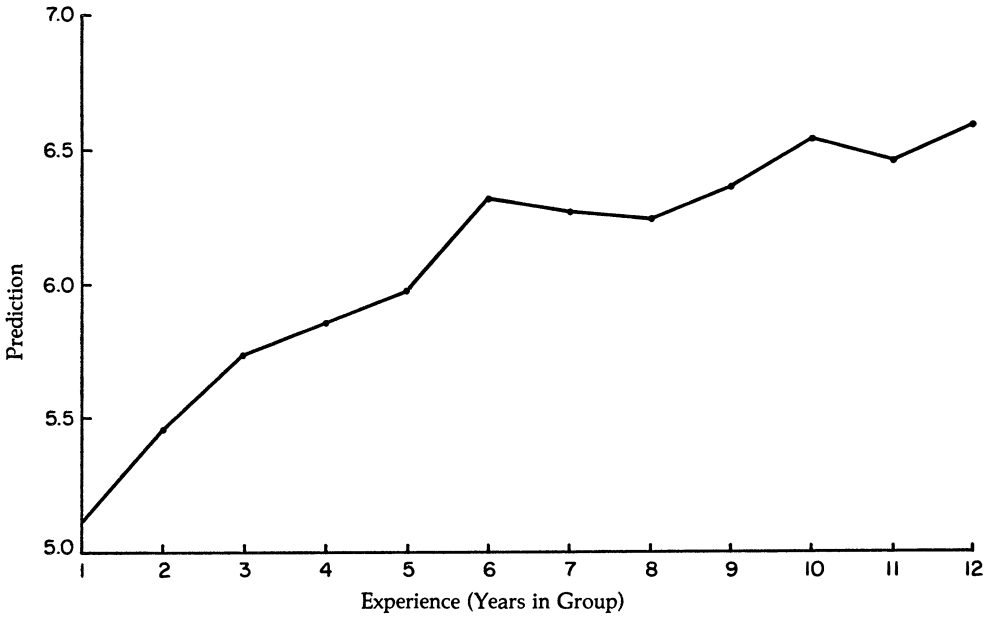
Similarly, solidary benefits are rarely mentioned as a major reason for joining. Yet they too are significant factors in the retention choice. For those seeking such interactions, the organization delivers the goods. Others may discover that a by-product of searching over purposive and collective benefits is a rewarding associational involvement. Again, the tension between initial and subsequent conditional membership choices stems from the fact that contributors learn over time. Those who find rewarding interpersonal relationships stay in Common Cause; those who either do not care about such interactions or decide that the organization does not provide the solidary benefits they desire, depart.

The findings regarding learning offer a second test of the experiential search theory and, once again, provide validation. Specifically, they lend credence to the hypothesis that experiential learning yields diminishing marginal returns. Each year has a positive, yet declining, impact on the probability that members will remain committed even after all the standard costs and benefits of joining are incorporated into the model. Ceteris paribus, a newcomer scores three-quarters-of-a-point lower on the seven-point scale than the most veteran contributors. In other words, there is considerable vacillation among new members about their future intentions, but this uncertainty dissipates over time. By and large, departing contributors are recent converts who, upon learning about the group, become disenchanted; they are not long-term members who grow bored with Common Cause.

Similarly, the *overall* predictions from the full experiential search model (model 4) lend credence to the hypothesis that the probability of staying increases temporally but at a diminishing rate (Figure 2). The impact of the early years is roughly five times greater than the effect of the later years; and, as discussed previously, there are no obvious differences between long-term members and newcomers that might render this relationship artifactual. The only possible inference is that individuals learn and update their information. Those who like what they see stay, and the rest search elsewhere. This conclusion is consistent with Common Cause's own troubles in holding onto new members. Only about 55% of first-year members continue to contribute the following year, while roughly 90% of long-time members remain.

Finally, consider what happens when the sample is split between newcomers—those contributing for six years or less—and veterans and a revised version of model 4 is estimated (Table 6).[32] Most strikingly—but predictably from an ex-

Figure 2. Retention Predictions and Organizational Experience



Note: Predictions are based on the seven-point scale used to measure a respondent's probability of retention. Scores range from one (certain to quit) to seven (certain to renew).

periential search perspective—the model does a superior job of explaining why newcomers come and go as compared to veterans. Longer-term members more closely approximate the full information ideal and are prone to depart for idiosyncratic reasons. Also as predicted, specific characteristics loom larger in newcomers' retention decisions.

While there is no appreciable difference between the two samples in the findings for purposive benefits (no coefficient is significant), there are variations in the effects of solidary benefits and especially collective returns. In the latter the impact of these factors is stronger for newcomers than for veterans. Not only is learning about specific characteristics crucial, it is especially salient for those who are new to the organization.[33]

All three tests of the experiential search perspective support its validity as a superior framework for conceptualizing the retention choice. Members make their decisions in a systematic, comprehensible fashion. The decision to remain in the organization reflects their discovery that the group provides the benefits they are searching for. Learning is an important component in understanding how conditional membership choices are made. Overall predictions about the probability of remaining in the organization reflect the diminishing marginal returns to be expected if individuals garner information through experiential search. An individ-

Table 6. Retention Decisions of Shorter- and Longer-Term Members

Variable	Newcomers	Veterans
Constant	−.23	2.06**
Costs		
Ability to pay	.04	.01
Low sensitivity to costs	1.12**	.56**
Moderate sensitivity to costs	.58**	.23**
Divisible benefits		
Value of political information	−.01	.06
Publications' value	.12*	.07*
Low sensitivity to provision of publications	.29*	.10
Moderate sensitivity to provision of publications	.09	−.03
Political aspirations	−.19	−.10
Learning		
Organizational experience	.10**	.04*
Collective benefits		
Agreement with group's positions	.01**	.01**
Assessment of leadership's achievements	.28**	.24**
Activism in group	.16**	.08*
Feeling of personal efficacy regarding group	.02	.06*
Purposive benefits		
Care about group	.05	.04
Sense of citizen duty	.10	.04
Solidary benefits		
Value interaction	−.04	.13
Friends or colleagues are members	.20**	.06
Number of cases	370	560
Adjusted R^2	.40	.24

*$p < .10$
**$p < .05$

ual's first years in the organization are especially important—particularly for learning about highly specific characteristics.

Conclusions: Experiential Search and the Retention Choice

Understanding why people leave or remain in groups has received little attention. The retention decision should not be taken as a given, that is, something that is determined by the initial choice to contribute. The conditional membership decision is fundamental for organizational stability and is a constant source of anxiety for group leaders. It reflects an experiential search process through which contributors acquire information and make increasingly knowledgeable choices.

This perspective is very different from either a game-theoretic framework or those decision-theoretic models adopted by previous analysts of organizational membership. Here it is assumed that imperfectly informed decision makers are aware of their shortfalls and take them into account in making choices while playing against nature. Because accruing

information is costly, there is an incentive to become informed in the most efficient way possible. If the price of membership is small and a mistake is easily rectified at the next contribution period, joining a group and learning about it experientially may well be the optimal strategy.

Common Cause members behave very much in this manner. The following picture of the average contributor emerges from this analysis: Individuals join an organization about which they are largely uninformed. They have a rough idea about what it stands for, but they lack the detailed knowledge needed to decide whether this is the best association for them. They are as informed about politics, as educated, and as wealthy as long-time members. But they lack organization-specific information, which is best gained experientially.

Consequently, the retention process is explicable by specifying a model that reflects information updating. Among other things, the findings make clear that early on when the incremental informational gains are greatest, there is a higher probability that revising prior beliefs will precipitate departures. As time progresses and the additional impact of another period diminishes, so too does the probability of dropping out. The accrual of knowledge about the organization also leads members to rely upon more specific criteria in making their conditional membership decisions than they claim motivated their initial contributions. Examining the model's overall predictions about future membership behavior simply buttresses the experiential search story further. So too does the contrast between what the model reveals about newcomers and about veterans.

Group participation ought to be conceptualized as an experiential search process in which individuals with only imperfect information are forced to make choices. They may commit calculated mistakes, but they will eventually rectify them. This framework makes organizational quitting understandable and provides a linkage between the initial membership choice and follow-up decisions. It furnishes insights into how the ebb and flow of group membership ought to vary systematically across associations, depending upon both the costs of contributing and the variety of benefits available to association members. Any number of interesting comparisons for testing this general perspective spring to mind: for example, contrasting an organization like Common Cause which conducts much of its business through the mail and over the telephone, and one like the League of Women Voters, for which interpersonal interactions that provide solidary rewards are more central.

The empirical findings suggest that group leaders might weigh newer members' preferences more heavily than those of long-time contributors, assuming that both are equally valued. They also imply that any educational efforts should be centered on appealing to these newcomers; utilizing scarce resources to sway veteran participants is likely to be a less productive investment.

What is needed in the future is the collection of data better designed to capture the dynamics of retention choices. Without a doubt, the key flaw of the present research is that only limited temporal data are available. Future endeavors must employ longitudinal designs, including studies that follow up on individuals who begin, continue, and cease contributing (and perhaps go elsewhere); analyses that explicitly build in samples of the general public as well as group members; and research that incorporates a multiplicity of groups varying on those dimensions that should affect the amount of experiential search undertaken. Such data will provide a better, more integrated understanding of why people join and either stay in or leave organizations than the initial attempt made in this analysis.

Notes

Earlier versions of this research can be found in California Institute of Technology Social Science Working Paper no. 651 and in a paper presented at the 1987 annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Charlotte, NC. The assistance of John Aldrich, Kim Border, Bruce Cain, Jeffrey Dubin, Thomas Gilligan, Jonathan Nagler, Barbara Rothenberg, and John Wright is appreciated.

1. Building a core membership is extremely important for ensuring long-term organizational survival. Even those associations that receive foundation grants and support from other organizations may find that these sources of income are unreliable.

2. In her study of four Michigan groups, Cook (1984) does provide some data on whether member satisfaction-dissatisfaction is associated with intentions to remain in the organization. Moe (1980) also touches on the decision to exit in his empirical work. In an intriguing theoretical piece, Johnson (1987) demonstrates that if a median voter rule were employed in determining dues levels (contributors constitute the electorate), voluntary associations would inevitably collapse due to exit. He also correctly notes, however, that group leaders can thwart this potential instability. At Common Cause, for example, dues are set by those running the organization. In his well-known work, Hirschman (1970) acknowledges that individuals may respond to changes in organizational performance by departing. However, his model is based on the idea that deteriorating leadership performance over time may precipitate either exit or voice from individuals possessing perfect information. By contrast, the present research explores the implications of imperfect information for members' behavior.

3. *Retention* is the term utilized in studies of reenlistment decisions by military personnel (e.g., Gotz and McCall 1983, 1984).

4. This is a generic problem that all organizational leaders face. Employers, for instance, also deal with the problem of holding onto valuable workers, as well as attracting capable replacements. What sharply distinguishes interest groups from other organizations is that nonparticipation in the public arena is a far more viable alternative.

5. The Common Cause survey was conducted in the fall of 1981 by the political science department of Stanford University. It was funded by grant SES-8105708 from the National Science Foundation to Heinz Eulau in support of research by Jonathan Siegel. Many thanks to Siegel for generously sharing these data. Because this is a stratified sample, the descriptive information is frequently broken down between rank-and-file members and activists; but, to reiterate, the sample design has no impact on the hypothesis tests conducted. Only if the sample is stratified on the choice in question—for example, the decision to join—is there a problem.

6. Not all of the alternative specifications are examined here. For example, Smith (1985) develops a model of contributions to environmental organizations based on the theory of club goods. However, none of the public goods that Common Cause (or few other groups) might provide have an element of excludability to them, which is essential for translating the economic theory of clubs into one of group membership. Similarly, Hansen (1985) furnishes a context-dependent model of membership decisions based on prospect theory. Incorporating his insights would require a complete panel design.

7. Although the traditional distinction between purposive and collective benefits is employed at this point in the analysis, a different perspective on this dichotomy will be introduced later.

8. Moe takes the imperfect information assumption somewhat further, but almost strictly from the perspective of group leaders (particularly, how to structure an organization to encourage donations) rather than from the contributors' viewpoint.

9. An interesting implication is that fewer members will learn experientially in groups with expensive membership charges. Instead, potential contributors will use their resources to search from outside of the organization. Membership in interest groups with relatively high dues should therefore be less volatile than in comparatively "cheap" organizations.

10. A quintessential example of exogenous forces is found in Wilson's (1962) observation that "amateur Democrats" lose their enthusiasm to spend endless hours working for the cause once an election is over.

11. As will be discussed in more detail, the ideal means of studying membership would be through a panel study. The analysis presented here is a second best alternative.

12. Respondents were asked whether their present family income was (1) under $10,000; (2) $10,000–$20,000; (3) $20,000–$25,000; (4) $25,000–$35,000; (5) $35,000–$50,000; (6) $50,000–$75,000; (7) $75,000–$100,000; or (8) over $100,000.

13. Seventy-three percent of those contacted actually wrote: 60% of the rank and file and 90% of all activists. Further corroboration of the mobilization of the membership is given by the finding that 44% of those sampled (35% of the rank-and-file members contacted and 78% of the activists) reported writing in the previous year about at least one of the following six issues: a constitutional amendment limiting government spending, sunset laws, campaign finance, reapportionment, lobby disclosure, or the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

14. An overwhelming 98.5% of those queried reported reading the Common Cause publications they receive.

15. The 31 reasons for joining listed in Table 1 were coded from 99 different answers. Only those citing a specific issue or issues, leadership, nonpar-

tisan group, or unique-important were subsequently difficult to classify into the four broad categories. They accounted for about 8% of the respondents.

16. Empirically there should be (and is) a positive relationship between knowledge—and organizational experience generally—and the decision to stay in the group. Those who gain information and do not like what they learn drop out.

17. A strong caveat is in order: Cross-sectional evidence is being used to draw temporal conclusions. It is nevertheless hard to tell a compelling story about how employing this cross-sectional information would confound this part of the analysis. Thus it is worthwhile to try to uncover evidence of contributor learning with these data, especially because they are probably the best currently available.

18. The four statements (with their answers), to which members could reply *true*, *false*, or *don't know* are (1) members of Common Cause elect the governing board [true]; (2) members of Common Cause elect the Common Cause chairman [false]; (3) Common Cause is a federation of state and local organizations [false]; and (4) Common Cause state organizations determine their own issue agendas [true]. A further check was performed to make sure that the relationship between knowledge and tenure is not a spurious reflection of the fact that activists have been in the group longer. The data show that even after controlling for whether respondents are activists or rank-and-file members, the association remains quite strong, although activism also is related to organizational knowledge.

19. The one exception dealt with constitutional amendments limiting government spending. This issue was relatively new on the Common Cause agenda, and long-time members themselves might not have had time to learn about it. More than 40% of the entire membership had no opinion on Common Cause's position on it, as compared to a maximum of 18% on the other four items.

20. Rather than being asked how many years they have been activists, these members were requested to choose one of five categories: (1) 8–10 years, (2) 6–7 years, (3) 4–5 years, (4) 2–3 years, and (5) 1 year or less. The three-year estimate is conservative; it is based on the greatest possible number of years—10, 7, 5, 3, or 1—that participants might have been involved relative to the number of years they have been in the group. If the means of the categories were substituted for the upper bounds, modal activists would be in their fourth year.

21. As mentioned, family income is tapped with an eightfold variable. Cost sensitivity is gauged with two dummy variables coded from a question in which members were asked if they would remain in the organization *(yes, can't say, no)* if Common Cause raised its annual dues from $20 to $40.

22. Members were asked two fivefold questions about the importance to them personally of (a) magazines and other Common Cause publications and (b) the political information the association provided. They were also given a question parallel to the one on cost sensitivity in which they were queried whether they would stop contributing if the publications were halted.

23. Position agreement is measured as

$$-1\left[\sum_{i=1}^{5}(X_{ip}-X_{ic})^2\right],$$

where X_{ip} and X_{ic} are, respectively, contributors' personal preferences and views of where Common Cause stands on the following issues: an amendment limiting government spending, sunset legislation, campaign finance laws, the ERA, and lobby disclosure laws. Of course, only those respondents with personal preferences and estimates of Common Cause positions are included. Contributors without issue opinions (see Tables 3 and 4) are excluded. Leadership assessment is an additive index combining fivefold responses to questions about the legislative success of Common Cause and an explicit rating of how well the leadership and staff do their jobs. Activity is tapped by counting whether a person has (a) written or talked to Common Cause staff or leaders about a group policy or position; (b) attempted to attract new contributors; (c) attended a local Common Cause meeting in the last year; (d) voted in the 1981 governing board elections; or (e) completed the 1981 membership poll. Finally, the personal efficacy measure combines the responses to two parallel questions on how important to the success of Common Cause individuals think their own contributions and their own political activities are.

24. The former is an additive index of the importance assigned to membership in Common Cause as a means of fulfilling the responsibilities of citizenship, supporting leaders like John Gardner and Archibald Cox and helping to ensure good government. Caring is an additive scale of member interest in each of the five issues used to construct the position agreement scale.

25. The former is a fivefold response to a question on the importance contributors attribute to meeting interesting people and making new friends.

26. It might be maintained, in the spirit of the so-called garbage can theory (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972; March 1978), that organizational experience is tapping the adaptation of preferences to what Common Cause has to offer, that is, the conventional assumption that preferences are fixed may be incorrect. Admittedly, it is impossible to distinguish definitively between changing preferences and learning given the lack of panel data. However, the fixed preference assumption is probably quite reasonable. It has been shown in this analysis that individuals do learn about the organization's operations and issue positions. It is also hard to believe

that Common Cause members suddenly develop a preference for good government, political information, or social interactions once they sign up for the group.

27. Before estimating the models, a number of preliminary steps were taken. To ensure that it is acceptable to pool the Common Cause–designated activists with rank-and-file members a Chow test (Chow 1960) was conducted. The results of the test proved to be insignificant, thus permitting the pooling. Also, Hausman tests (Hausman 1978) were utilized to ascertain whether any of the independent variables were endogenously determined (the logarithmic and linear organizational experience terms were tested jointly): none were. Additional tests were undertaken to investigate whether the standard sevenfold specification of the dependent variable was correct. A Hausman test for determining whether the slopes for a seven-ordered probit are identical to those for a threefold analog *(no, can't say, yes)* led to the rejection of the null hypothesis that $\mathbf{B}_7 = \mathbf{B}_3$ ($X^2 = 35$, $df = 19$). This finding implies that the seven-category operationalization is subject to specification error of some sort, although the ramifications are uncertain. This discovery precipitated a further investigation to uncover whether a better specification was available. The obvious alternative is a two-stage conditional structure that breaks the retention decision first into a direction *(no, can't say, yes)* and then into a strength *(certain, very likely, likely)* choice. When the log-likelihood ratios of the conditional and unconditional processes are compared (see Vuong 1986), however, the latter model is far superior. Given this strong finding, the unconditional, sevenfold specification was adopted with the caveat that there might be some superior alternative. Having decided upon this specification, both ordinary least squares (OLS) and probit estimation were employed. The results are identical for all intents and purposes; the OLS results are reported here due to their ease of interpretation. To reiterate what has been noted previously: attrition should not have had an impact on the estimates in Table 5. As long as quitting is related to exogenous factors—unhappiness with the group, evaluations of the leadership, and so on—and these factors are controlled for, the ensuing estimates are unbiased. None of the difficulties associated with choice-based sampling are relevant in this case.

28. Multicollinearity is not a major problem in these models. The linear and logarithmic learning terms are highly correlated. This intercorrelation is to be expected but, as mentioned, utilizing a logarithmic and a linear term was suggested to tap diminishing marginal returns (see, for example, Maddala 1977). If one of the two terms is excluded, the other findings do not change substantially. On examining the intercorrelations between the independent variables, only two other pairs of correlations are above the .30 level: the valuation of political information and publications (.59) and the two dummy variables on cost sensitivity (−.60). Combining the information and publication variables results in a poorer-fitting model. The resulting variable is insignificant (whereas the publications' value is significant in Table 5), and no other substantive results change. There is also no appreciable change if the variable measuring moderate sensitivity to costs is dropped except that the coefficient for high sensitivity increases in magnitude. To explore more systematically the potential for multicollinearity, the singular-value decomposition (SVD) recommended by Belsley, Kuh, and Welsch (1980) was performed for model 4. Interestingly, the SVD for the full model shows a moderate level of multicollinearity (SVD = 60). However, a major cause of this multicollinearity is the relationship between the intercept term and other variables: this result is common when using dummy variables but does not harm the estimates. If the intercept and the logarithmic learning terms are dropped, the SVD is cut in half, to a level where experimental work shows the multicollinearity is quite small (SVD = 30). Again, the findings are robust with respect to multicollinearity.

29. Unfortunately, no good measure of nonpecuniary costs was available for the whole sample. An indicator that worked for part of it ($N = 395$) was whether or not Common Cause members responded to attempts to mobilize them. Even after controlling for all other factors, these costs are important determinants of the retention decision. This result provides evidence that those who find these additional organizational demands taxing depart, presumably either to find an association where they can simply write checks or to leave the world of organizational participation completely.

30. An increase of one standard deviation in a member's score on each of the collective benefit indicators would result in a jump of .71 on the retention scale. This change is slightly greater than the impact of membership costs (.63), followed by divisible benefits (.23), purposive returns (.21), organizational experience (.18), and solidary rewards (.17). The strength of membership costs might be a bit of a surprise. However, the measures of cost sensitivity—the willingness to quit in response to a $20 increase in dues—are also tapping estimates of the value of benefits.

31. These findings are based on a regression using the model 4 specification, with the sums of the squared differences for each issue being substituted separately instead of cumulatively. The two relatively new issues on the Common Cause agenda—ERA and placing limits on government spending—are not relevant. These concerns represent a departure from the issues for which the organization gained its reputation and apparently have not become a prime reason for remaining in the organization (or for joining, probably).

32. The logarithmic term for learning is now unnecessary, since the sample was split according to how many years a contributor was in the group. The definitive means of testing whether coefficients vary between newcomers and veterans is to employ interaction terms with the full sample. However, multicollinearity makes such estimates unfeasible in this instance.

33. The larger impact of cost sensitivity on newcomers than veterans probably reflects the former's greater uncertainty about the value of membership.

References

Amemiya, Takeshi. 1985. *Advanced Econometrics.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Arnold, R. Douglas. 1982. "Overtilled and Undertilled Fields in American Politics." *Political Science Quarterly* 97:91–103.

Axelrod, Robert. 1984. *The Evolution of Cooperation.* New York: Basic Books.

Belsley, David A., Edwin Kuh, and Roy E. Welsch. 1980. *Regression Diagnostics: Identifying Influential Data and Sources of Collinearity.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Berry, Jeffrey M. 1977. *Lobbying for the People: The Political Behavior of Public Interest Groups.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Burdett, Kenneth. 1978. "A Theory of Employee Job Search and Quit Rates." *American Economic Review* 68:212–20.

Chow, Gregory C. 1960. "Tests of Equality between Sets of Coefficients in Two Linear Regressions." *Econometrica* 28:591–605.

Clark, Peter B., and James Q. Wilson. 1961. "Incentive Systems: A Theory of Organization." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 6:129–66.

Cohen, Michael D., James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen. 1972. "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17:1–25.

Cook, Constance E. 1984. "Participation in Public Interest Groups: Membership Motivations." *American Politics Quarterly* 12:409–30.

Gotz, Glenn A., and John J. McCall. 1983. "Sequential Analysis of the Stay/Leave Decision: U.S. Air Force Officers." *Management Science* 29:335–51.

Gotz, Glenn A., and John J. McCall. 1984. *A Dynamic Retention Model for Air Force Officers: Theory and Estimates.* Rand Report R-3028-AF. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.

Hansen, John Mark. 1985. "The Political Economy of Group Membership." *American Political Science Review* 79:79–96.

Hardin, Russell. 1982. *Collective Action.* Baltimore: Resources for the Future.

Hausman, Jerry A. 1978. "Specification Tests in Econometrics." *Econometrica* 46:1251–71.

Hausman, Jerry A. 1978. "Specification Tests in Econometrics." *Econometrica* 46:1251–71.

Hausman, Jerry A., and David A. Wise. 1979. "Attrition Bias in Experimental and Panel Data: The Gary Income Maintenance Experiment." *Econometrica* 47:445–73.

Hirschman, Albert O. 1970. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Johnson, Paul E. 1987. "Social Choice in Voluntary Organizations: Myopia, Foresight, and Majority Rule Decision Processes." Presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago.

McFarland, Andrew S. 1984. *Common Cause: Lobbying in the Public Interest.* Chatham, NJ: Chatham House.

Maddala, G.S. 1977. *Econometrics.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

March, James G. 1978. "Bounded Rationality, Ambiguity, and the Engineering of Choice." *Bell Journal of Economics* 9:587–608.

Moe, Terry M. 1980. *The Organization of Interests: Incentives and the Internal Dynamics of Political Interest Groups.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mortensen, Dale T. 1986. "Job Search and Labor Market Analysis." In *Handbook of Labor Economics,* vol. 2, ed. Orley Ashenfelter and Richard Layard. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science.

Olson, Mancur. 1965. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Pindyck, Robert S., and Daniel L. Rubinfeld. 1981. *Econometric Models and Economic Forecasts.* 2d ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Schlesinger, Joseph A. 1966. *Ambition and Politics: Political Careers in the United States.* Chicago: Rand McNally.

Shaiko, Ronald G. 1986. "Interest Group Research: Cultivating an Unsettled Plot." *Polity* 18:720–32.

Smith, V. Kerry. 1985. "A Theoretical Analysis of the 'Green Lobby.'" *American Political Science Review* 79:132–47.

Vuong, Quang H. 1986. "Likelihood Ratio Tests for Model Selection and Non-Nested Hypotheses." Social Science Working Paper no. 605. California Institute of Technology.

Walker, Jack. 1983. "The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America." *American Political Science Review* 77:390–406.

Wilde, Louis L. 1979. "An Information-Theoretic Approach to Job Quits." In *Studies in the Economics of Search,* ed. Steven A. Lippman and John J. McCall. Amsterdam: North-

Holland.
Wilson, James Q. 1962. *The Amateur Democrat: Club Politics in Three Cities.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Wilson, James Q. 1973. *Political Organizations.* New York: Basic Books.

Lawrence S. Rothenberg is Assistant Professor of Political Science, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA 91125.